CHAPTER - VI

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The discourse presented in the preceding chapters show that during the years of her association with India between 1898 to 1911, Sister Nivedita made this country her own, and worked selflessly towards the goal of making India rise as a nation in her own right by making wholesome contribution with ideas as well as activities in the sphere of education, religion, and politics, and thus justifying the name Nivedita -- The Dedicated -- her Guru Swami Vivekananda gave her. In the discussion that follows we take stock of her nationalistic ideas and explain why her ideas remain as relevant for India of today as she was for India of her time.

The necessity of an appreciation and understanding of her conception of Indian nationalism and nationalistic philosophy can hardly be denied or its relevance, even after a century, questioned. It would be betraying a narrow-mindedness to assess Sister Nivedita’s contribution to national movement only with reference to the nature and the length of the period of her participation in the revolutionist movement of the initial years of the last century. While it is necessary to highlight this participation, it is equally or even more important to assert that her greatness is to be discerned not merely in this, but in other spheres of her multifarious but unified activities, particularly in the spheres of education and culture. It is essential to fix attention on her creation which was the product of her deep insight and intellect precisely because a group of people have, perhaps motivated by prejudice, become critical against her for her nationalistic attitude and supposed intellectual incompetence. These critics are plainly indifferent to the real essence of the Indian nation and its culture. They would condemn as narrow whatever is outside of their beliefs and ideals, whatever does not fit well into their mindset. The truth is, in Nivedita’s deep and vast intellect and her wide erudition, which produced her nationalistic philosophy and her vision of a resurgent India, there were elements which were beyond the scope of understanding of many of her own and later times. We would assert
that all those elements when harmoniously blended can help create a healthy Indian society, overcoming the chaos of ideas, opinions, and interests. This harmonious blending of varieties, and even opposites for peaceful and healthy existence in the essence of India which Nivedita understood and propagated. Propagation of the real essence of India was the spring of her concept of Education and her scheme of education. When this is acknowledged and understood, then only an assessment of this great soul will be possible.

The two large volumes of ‘Letters of Sister Nivedita’ give us a mass of information about the contemporary national life; there are hints and references in these letters which may be of fruitful use in the field of social research. These letters pave for the social science researchers the way to the inner facts and significations which worked behind the political events of the times. These letters reveal, on the one hand, the soothing beauty of a noble soul that was entirely engaged in the creation of resurgent and vibrant India freed from the shackles of foreign rule and age-old conventional beliefs and practices, and, on the other, the sharpened claws of the colonialist-imperialist powers who hijacked the liberties of the people. At the same time she brings to our notice in an objective manner the presence of a small group of English people who had liberal and humanistic attitudes towards the natives of the subjugated land. Nivedita’s letters are an invaluable source for the reconstruction of the political, social, and cultural history of the period of national struggle.

This leads us inevitably to a consideration of Sister Nivedita’s ‘Indianness’. Her participation in the national struggle, her embracing of what India stands for, her tireless effort to define a fit policy of education for India appears surprising when we keep in mind that she was a European; she was one behind whom stood the long and rich European tradition. For a typical European it is almost impossible to become a true Indian; there are many things in the concept of Indianness which a European can hardly understand, far less wholeheartedly accept. The novelty in the case of Nivedita is that she became an Indian, mind and soul, and put everything in stake for India and Indianness. To Nivedita, Indian Renaissance was not a
version of the European Renaissance that had begun its chequered history in Italy in the fourteenth century. The awakening of India was transformed into an Indian Renaissance for which the greatest amount of endeavour came from Nivedita. This assertion is made even while keeping in mind the works initiated by Swami Vivekananda. The brevity of Vivekananda’s life made it essential for his disciple Sister Nivedita to bear the burden of translating his thoughts into practice and a body of philosophy.

Nivedita’s part in the political struggle of India must also be remembered in any discussion of her endeavour to build up an awakened India. Her active participation in this struggle is somewhat less important than her efforts to create an intellectual basis which is essential for the success of the struggle. And when we speak of her concept of ‘Indian nationalism’, we must remind ourselves once more that she did not mean by this term only Hindu nationalism. In this sphere also she is truly modern because she is truly secular who included all the Indians irrespective of their religious faiths. Everybody who lives in India is an Indian, no matter whether he is Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian. It is necessary to keep the focus on this point, on the openness of Nivedita’s mind, on the unification of the multiple facets of her creative mind who conceptualised education as the means of the goal of unification of all Indians.

Sister Nivedita must be ranked along with the prominent sociologists of the Western world. Like them, she also devoted herself to the task of creating a nation, and in her case, the Indian nation. She saw that in India there were diverse communities and her endeavour was to unify and harmonise them in a single Indian nation. For this the most important task was to discover the point in which all the Indians meet; this point is the Indian culture. As an intellectual sociologist and historian she made this discovery, and this ensured her ever-enduring place in the history of modern India. Among her contributions must be included the fact that through her writings she remoulded and restructured the European conception of India and convinced Europe that India was not a land of mere occultism; neither was she a votary of Indian occultism.

Sister Nivedita, who had immense respect for the past of India, did not
live in the past of the country, but in its present and its future. She was one of those intellectual giants whose realisation was that the past must be studied with a view to understanding the present and building up the future. For building up the future of India, a strong spirituality, as well as scientifically advanced land of peace and plenty, there must be simultaneous acceptance of modern science and universalised ancient wisdom and spiritualism. The scheme of education must be prepared keeping this goal constantly in view -- this is what Nivedita demanded and actually did.

Sister Nivedita’s conceptualisation of Indian nationalism is perhaps her greatest contribution to India’s national struggle. Not only India, but even England acknowledged the fact that it was Nivedita who was the first to form a philosophy of Indian nationalism. It was by the beginning of 1903 that she first joined the nationalist struggle in India, and immediately the realisation dawned upon her that the term ‘nationalism’ must be applied to India in its broadest sense which must include both the Hindus and the Muslims. She was convinced that the sense of nationalism would become the most potent weapon in the hands of India to defeat the hostile forces. When the people of the land shall feel that they belong to one nation, a tremendous unconquerable force shall be created. It is in this sense that she held that her goal was to create an Indian nation.

Nivedita preached her concept of nationalism through numberless articles, speeches, and books. As she started her struggle for creating a sense of Indian nationalism, she began by locating the strength and weakness of Indian through a thorough study of the country’s history. Europeans had no idea of what came to be known as ‘Unity is diversity’. Europeans looked at India as a land of diverse languages, religions, and cultures which maintained an unhappy existence and without any hope of harmonisation. This typical European view she rejected, while accepting the outer fact that there were diverse religions and cultures. But she was gifted with the inner sight which enabled her to discover that beneath all these diversities, there constantly flew an inner sense of cohesion among cultures -- the life style of the people and their sense of belonging to one geographical entity. She also had the knowledge how, to the outer sight, the
Indian societies had many things to be condemned. But the outer sight was quite superfluous and deceptive. It required a depth of sight and a sound intellect that forces of unity were always present, though enfeebled because of historical reasons. She understood that if India was to achieve independence and resurgent flow of life, she will have to be conscious of India's glorious past, of her peerless culture on the one hand, and, on the other, reap the benefits of the new knowledged which flowed into the country from the western world. She knew that India in the ancient times spanning through centuries lived a life of meditation and spiritualism, and made great sacrifice for this. This is the inner strength of the country which must be revived and directed towards the building up the spirit of nationalism. Nationalism must be accepted with religious sentiment; nationalism must be the religion of the people of India. In all her writings she preached this philosophy, this religion of nationalism which would give India a position in the world beyond the reach of any other country. It is worth mentioning that after Nivedita’s death, the West Minster Gazette noted that Miss Noble “addressed large audiences in various cities on Indian ideals, ancient and modern, and there are many who think that her voice was the first to give definite and challenging form to the religion of nationalism.”

Nivedita’s greatest work on the philosophy of nationalism is ‘The Web of Indian Life’. She had started writing the book while in England in 1901 and completed it in 1903. She believed and repeatedly said that the book was written not by herself but by Swamiji -- such was the inspiration she received from her Master. The book was completed after the demise of Swami Vivekananda to whom she dedicated it. The vision about India that was current in the Western countries because of the motivated misrepresentation done by the missionaries in connivance with the imperialists was shattered by Nivedita in this book with such force and arguments that her critics had either to strongly eulogise it or condemn it. While the lavish praise gave her some comfort she was mentally prepared for condemnation. The condemnation of the book was largely based on the fact that in it the author explored the necessity and possibility of channelising the ancient bases of Indian society and religion towards the building up of a new
and progressive India which was in consonance with her concept of Indian nationalism. Many of the critics, however, could not understand what Nivedita was driving at; and the few who understood it, failed to appreciate it. Nivedita had to take up pen to interpret the book in which religion has been shown as the unifying factor. She categorically stated that the theme of the book is the unity between the Hindus and Muslims of India and their same glorious future. This theme and its elaboration through the pages must be considered absolutely relevant to India of our contemporary times.

Nivedita was entirely devoted to concept of Hindu-Muslim unity in India. In two independent chapters of ‘The Web of Indian Life’, the ‘The Synthesis of Indian Thought’, and ‘Islam in India’ she dealt with the culture of the Indian Muslims. In one of her later essays, ‘The Modern Epoch and the National Idea’, she discussed the contribution of the Indian Muslims to the concept of Indian Nationalism. Nivedita also firmly believed that national unity depends on ‘place’; that India is geographically so situated that it may become the ground for Indian nationalism. Lala Lajpat Rai refers to this while discussing another very important book written by Sister Nivedita, ‘Footfalls of Indian History’ : “Sister Nivedita refers to the ‘geographical synthesis’. This is a theme of absorbing interest to all Indians interested in the future of their country, because it is absolutely necessary to realise that ‘the whole of India is necessary to the explanation of the history of each one of its parts .......... India is at once the occasion and the explanation of the web of Indian thought’.”

‘The Web of Indian Life’ was attacked vehemently by the imperialists -- religious and political. The first group was represented by Miss Carmichael who in her book ‘Things As They Are’ used unmissionary-like language to debunk the book. For this sort of attack she was not, however, spared by even some Europeans. Political imperialism had as their mouthpieces the paper ‘The Pioneer’ which held that Nivedita’s book was nothing but a political pamphlet in disguise, the object of which was “......... the demonstration that India is a single nation and not a congeries of divided races and religions and an appeal to that nation to realise its destiny by becoming independent family. Its leading characteristic is cunning and its
content mischievous." There is no doubt that from the imperialist’s point of view the book was cunning and mischievous, because it struck point blank the imperialist method of divide and rule. This must be regarded as one of the most fundamental and greatest services rendered by Sister Nivedita to India; she unmasked the face of the imperialist powers and paved the way for the growth of Indian nationalism.

II

Sister Nivedita’s overall approach to the Indian national awakening was distinguished by practical idealism. That this characteristic of her ideas and activities was not always understood in perspective and appreciated could be seen from some of the criticisms directed against Nivedita.

It is not difficult to guess that Nivedita was an anathema to the Christian missionaries. It is not unusual, therefore, to see 'The Church Times' observing that "In the 'Web of Indian Life' the authoress lets herself go, so to say, with entire abandon, to give us a couleur de rose picture of Indian life and thought. ............ It is all pure undiluted optimism ............ It is the suppression of the other side of the picture that we deprecate in the interest, not only of the truth, but of the cause of Indian women themselves, whose lot will never be improved if this sort of sentimental idealism about them is allowed to obtain credence." 1

It should not be forgotten that the basic goal of Nivedita’s work in India, which she was never tired of pointing out in her writings and speeches, was to inspire a great feeling of nationality among Indians and as such she wanted to look only at the positive aspects of the life in India, to look at all that was noble in the Indian life, Indian home, Indian institution and to portray the truth about the India in its ‘vitality’ and not merely in its ‘dimensions’. Nivedita wanted to inspire -- a task which she thought she
could do better by sympathising and by criticising. But the fact that she did not criticise did not mean that she wanted to maintain the old customs unchanged. As S.K. Ratcliffe, the editor of The Statesman during Nivedita’s time, observed: "It appeared to some that Sister Nivedita, alike in her school and in the Zenana, was in certain respects a reactionary influence -- upholding the purdah and child marriage and perpetual widowhood as institutions essential to the preservation of the society which she had learned to admire. But she was far indeed from seeking to maintain the old unchanged." An even more perceptive comment comes from Rabindranath Tagore which puts Nivedita in a perspective most appropriate to understand and appreciate her:

"As a race we have our special limitations and imperfections, and for a foreigner it does not require a high degree of keen-sightedness to detect them. We know for certain that these defects did not escape Nivedita’s observation, but she did not stop there to generalise, as most other foreigners do. And because she had a comprehensive and extra-ordinary insight of love she could see creative ideals at work behind our social forms and discover our soul that has living connexion with its past and is marching towards its fulfilment."

Nivedita wanted to change the meek, submissive and docile ‘face’ of India so that she could stand up to her foreign aggressor and come into her own by being free from the foreign domination. That Nivedita did not mean to give a narrow sectional meaning to her words and that her real purpose was to change the attitude of the Indians in the larger perspective of their internal freedom (i.e. freedom from their own inhibiting attitude of mind) and external freedom (i.e. freedom from the foreign domination of India) could be seen from the following observation of her: "Aggression is to be the dominant characteristic of the India that is today in school and classroom,--aggression, and the thought and ideals of aggression. Instead of passivity, activity; for the standard of weakness, the standard of strength; in the place of steadily yielding defence, the ringing cheer of the invading host. Merely to change the attitude of the mind in this way is already to accomplish a revolution."
Nivedita’s real purpose was to remake individual and national character. She makes this purpose even more explicit when she writes:

“The Indian people as a whole for the last two generations have been as men walking in a dream, without manhood, without power to react freely against conditions, without even common-sense.

But, today, in the deliberate adoption of an aggressive policy, we have put all this behind us. Realising that life is struggle, we are not determined that our wrestling with the powers that are against us, shall enable us to contribute to the world’s sum of culture, not merely to make adaptations from it. Our part henceforth is active, and not passive. The Indianising of India, the organising of our national strength, the laying out of our line of march, all this is to be done by us, not by others on our behalf. We accept no more programmes. Henceforth we become the makers of programmes. We obey no more policies. Henceforth do we create policies.”

Nivedita believed in the reality of ideals and that she wanted the fullest extension of the family ideal of Indians to the larger civic and national ideals. She strove relentlessly towards bringing the social consciousness of Indian in such direction. As for political consciousness, Nivedita used her tongue and her pen ceaselessly towards creating a sense of pride among Indians and making them believe in their own power, thereby seeking to rid them of the rule of foreigners. She did not want to exclude materialism. She only wanted a synthesis of idealism and materialism so that the Indians, charged with idealism, focus their strength and energy and give their all in the realistic cause of the freedom of their country. That is the reason she wanted the Indians to combine the use of Gita and the sword. Thus, in one of the exhortations to the Indians she asked, “............. when will the real fighter in the good cause rise up again, the Gita in one hand and a sword in the other?”

Nivedita was, no doubt, primarily an idealist, but to say that she was totally devoid of any sense of realism is to stretch the facts a little too far. It should be remembered that as a practical idealist wanting to enthuse the Indians with that sense of nationality which will enable them to assert their rightful place in the scheme of things, Nivedita wanted to found a new math
(order) after the name of her Guru, Swami Vivekananda, wherein students will receive training in political education for seven years. The first six months of each year they will devote to the study while the next six months they would be travelling to different places of pilgrimage in India, thereby receiving the first-hand knowledge of the soil and the people of their country. The students will, of course, live the life of brahmacharya in these seven years. Thus knowing the jana-desa-dharma -- the people, the country, and the religion, they would get a true education. 'Jana-desa-dharma' was the motto that Nivedita conceived for the student of her math. The plan fell through as the sannyasi authorities could not give their approval. 7 The point that needs stressing, however, is that Nivedita was not an unpractical idealist, not was she unrealistic in her ideas and conceptions. Perhaps she was a bit too romantic in her vision of the past, present, and future of India. 8 But that again had served a practical purpose: she was telling the Indians what a great people they were in the past and that once they took that lesson to their heart there was no reason why they should not again be able to reclaim their greatness and thus ensure for themselves an even greater future. Thus, if overflowing she was sometimes in her speeches and writings, that sort of indulgence was not far-fetched or far away from her central purpose, i.e. making India truly a great nation. Indians must be given that sort of consciousness and that was the motive force behind all of Nivedita's writings. "The whole task now," Nivedita wrote, "is to give the word nationality to India in all its breadth and meaning. The rest will do itself. India must be obsessed by this great idea. Hindu and Mohammedan must become one in it, with a passionate admiration of each other. It means a new view of history and customs, and it means the assimilation of the whole Ramakrishna-Vivekananda idea in religion, the synthesis of all religious ideas ......... the one essential fact is the realisation of Indian nationality by the nation." 9

Thus viewed, Nivedita, far from being unpractical, was realistic enough to write for a basic purpose which, in turn, was rooted in the Indian situation of the time. She was, so to say, neither a vague idealist, nor a barren realist. Her idealism was tempered by her realism and herein lies the
strength and uniqueness of the noble character that was Sister Nivedita -- 'the Dedicated.'

Nivedita was not only a mere idealist but also a shrewd politician. She had the shrewdness to realise that the 'house' of Congress divided against itself, could not stand very firm, especially when it had on its hands a fight against a mighty empire like that of the British. "Those who are fighting on different parts of the self-same field," Nivedita warned, "are wasting time and ammunition by turning their weapons on each other." 10

Nivedita not only preached the goal of unity but practised it herself in her own life. It was at once a measure of her statesmanship and shrewdness that she was able to maintain in her personal life the friendship with a moderate Gokhale, an extremist Bipin Paul, and revolutionary Aurobindo. These men, especially Gokhale and Aurobindo, were the anti-thesis of each other and therefore had never any love lost between them. 11 And yet when it came to Nivedita these men will pay obeisance to her in equal measure, respectfully accepting her advice and guidance in numerous affairs of public concern to them. 12 At the time of her first meeting with Aurobindo in Baroda in October 1902, Nivedita assured him with the following words: "You can count on me. I am your ally." 13 She kept her words to the last day of her life. Likewise, though she was never fond of the moderate politics of Gokhale, she maintained her friendship with Gokhale to the last day of her life. Gokhale had considerable influence in those days and Nivedita realised that a friendly rather than an antagonistic Gokhale would be far more congenial to her goal of pushing forward the cause of India's freedom.

The cause of India's freedom was so dear to Nivedita's heart that she would never allow personal difference in political modus operandi to interfere with this cause. As one who dreamt of a revolutionary uprising in India, Nivedita's politics did not have much in common with the politics of Gokhale. And yet if she maintained her relations with a moderate Gokhale as much as a revolutionary Aurobindo, the reason was her overwhelming concern for the freedom of India. More than anybody she realised the necessity of a united front against the British. To quote Reymond, the French biographer of Sister Nivedita, "She knew very well what the armed struggle in Ireland had been
like. In London she had taken part in active organisations and had lived among rebels." She did not want the warring groups within and outside the Congress to waste their energy in internecine fight as she wanted them all to direct their fighting power unitedly against the British Raj. She could not wish away the differences of Moderates, Extremists and Revolutionaries. But what is remarkable is that she herself was perfectly true to her preaching of unity among Indians. To quote Reymond: "Nivedita fought against an unhealthy intolerance which was dividing individuals, falsifying the relations, and sowing suspicion everywhere. In 1906, Gokhale, who was savagely assailed by extremists, was threatened with death, and Nivedita was thunder-struck. She went from one nationalist to another, demanding, 'Did you do that?' and adding, 'It's impossible! This is not the time to tear ourselves to pieces.'" She did not indulge in mutual bickerings of these groups. She did not lose her composure in the heat and dust generated by differences of opinion and methods. Like a true Karmayogin she was unruffled and steadfast in her goal of an India united enough to carry on to successful completion the struggle against the British Raj.

Put against this goal for India, personal promotion was nothing to Nivedita. She was offered in 1906 the editorship of Bala Bharat published from Madras. Tirumalacharya of Madras wanted to place the paper entirely at the disposal of Nivedita so as to improve and increase its influence. "In spite of the satisfaction such a post would have given her, Nivedita refused it. She had to remain detached, ready at the moment's notice to replace any 'opposition' editor who might find himself in difficulties, and to preserve (between the lines) the tone of 'constant sedition' that moulded public opinion." According to Girijasankar, she declined the offer also because her task of training the young revolutionaries of Bengal, especially those attached to the Yugantar group, in the techniques of Sinn Fein revolutionaries of Ireland was yet to be complete. Keeping her relation with Gokhale, writing for the Aurobindo-edited Bande Mataram and training the young revolutionaries were the dimensions of the same work for Nivedita. However contradictory these operations might have seemed to an outsider, they were not so to Nivedita. She could make a synthesis of all
those because she was guided by that one single goal of a united India fighting as a nation against the foreign usurper of her independence and regaining it on the strength of her unity and nationality.

The point that Nivedita made by asking the Indians not to waste their energy in mutual bickerings and misdirected efforts against their own countrymen is a consistent feature of her life and philosophy. The prime concern of all Indians had to be their sense of nationality, the most primary ingredient of which was their mutual sympathy and their sense of unity, not only in respect of their immediate concerns of ridding their country of foreign domination but also in the more positive respect of building a glorious India, having its rightful place in the comity of nations and commanding their respectful recognition and admiration.

This is an aim which India continues to strive to fulfil and which remains as valid today as it was in the days in which Nivedita fixed her sight for it. In order to pursue this goal in the most efficacious manner, we must suffuse ourselves with that sense of nationality, that mutual sympathy and fellow-feeling which she identified as the most basic element of the Indian nationality. "If the whole of India could agree to give, say, ten minutes every evening ............ to thinking a single thought, 'We are one. We are one. Nothing can prevail against us to make us think we are divided ............' -- the power that would be generated can hardly be measured," 18 observed Nivedita. Sister Nivedita could not have uttered and relentlessly pursued herself a more vital and realistic truth for India of those days as also for India of today.

Indeed given the sort of idealism that Nivedita underlines for India, Indian can achieve adequate, if not perfect, integration as a nation and take giant steps in all spheres of life -- social, political, moral, material, and intellectual and having thus 'arisen' she can use the united strength of a resurgent nation towards achieving a world order based on the essential oneness of humanity. The vigorous humanity of a resurgent India, so to say, must issue in the dedicated efforts towards realising through the communion of nations what Whalt Whitman calls "one heart to the globe."
Lord Curzon came to India in January 1899 as Viceroy and he retired from office on 18th November, 1905. The Swadeshi Movement was largely the outcome of Lord Curzon’s policy. On 19th July, 1905, the Government adopted a resolution approving partition of Bengal. In a mammoth meeting in the Town Hall in Calcutta, on 7th August, 1905, among other things, boycott of British goods was approved. Gokhale presided over the annual session of the Congress that was held at Benaras in December 1905. Nivedita was present at this Congress. There was a sort of tug-of-war between the Extremists and Moderates at this Congress. There were sharp differences of opinion between them on the issue of Boycott. In this connection the following account is noteworthy:

“The Bengal delegates, particularly the Extremists or National section, desired that the Congress should give its seal of approval upon the Boycott movement. But ............ the Moderate leaders were averse to it as it was in conflict with the policy of partition and persuasion which they had hitherto pursued. A proposal approving of Boycott led to an acrimonious discussion in the Subjects Committee and its fate hung in the balance when the Bengal delegates hit upon a device to coerce the Moderates. The Moderates proposed to send a message of welcome to the Prince and Princess of Wales during their forthcoming visit to India. But the delegates from Bengal opposed it on the ground that Bengal was in mourning and could not receive the Prince with a smiling face. Gokhale had given a pledge to Minto that he would stop the boycott of the royal visit. Besides, the Moderates could not think without horror that the resolution conveying such a loyal message would be opposed in the public session of the Congress. They were sure of getting it passed by a majority of votes, but the absence of unanimity would take away the grace and charm of such a message. At last both sides yielded to a considerable degree and a compromise was effected. The Bengal delegates agreed to leave the Congress pandal before the resolution about the message was moved, so that it might be unanimously passed. On their side, the Moderates offered an indirect support to the Boycott movement.” 19
But the resolution that was adopted on Boycott was somewhat ambiguous and vague.

The Benaras session was followed by the Calcutta session of the Congress in 1906. At this Congress the Extremists led by Tilak, Aurobindo and Bipin Chandra Paul organised themselves into a more distinct group or party within the Congress. The widening gulf between the Extremists (or Nationalists) and the Moderates greatly perturbed Nivedita. “She was pained to notice the widening of the split between the different parties in the Congress. She pleaded with the leaders not to break up its united front.”

The veteran journalist and leader Ramananda Chatterjee appropriately made the following observations regarding Sister Nivedita:

“She was pronounced nationalist .......... though her political opinions were quite radical and definite. She could never forgive partisanship or faction fights in Indian politics or journalism, she believed in the great need and efficacy of our presenting a united front ............. The promotion of the cause of nationality was with her a mission and a passion ............”

Pravrajika Atmaprana writes:

“Nivedita was a profound nationalist, though radical in her view. As against the policy of the Moderates, she supported the programme of the Nationalists. No incontrovertible evidence has yet been found to prove that she actively participated in the terrorists’ movement.”

However, the following account in Nivedita’s biography by Lizelle Reymond presents a different picture:

“She (Nivedita) did not remain unimplicated in the Muraripukur Road Laboratory .......... Nivedita did not hesitate to help these amateur chemists as best as she could. Daringly she smuggled them into the laboratories of the Presidency College as assistants of Jagadish Bose and P.C. Roy who was a professor of chemistry. Both needed laboratory aids. Both were of course unaware of Nivedita’s audacity in the matter of providing them.”

These amateur chemists were none but potential bomb manufacturers.

Sister Nivedita discussed and analysed Indian nationalism from different angles of vision. Again and again she emphasised the territorial factor. The fact that India had a clearly defined and distinct territory of her
own was a great advantage for her, for it contributed much to that concentrated corporate sentiment -- to that solid sense of unity, which was the essence of nationality. Nivedita wrote:

"The principle of nationality depends upon the fact that the supreme organic circumstance in moulding destiny of man, is place. Those who, having a common region of birth, connect the work, the institutions, the ideals, and the purposes of their lives with that region and with their fellows, and those who, doing this, undergo a common economics experience, from a nation, with the duties, the responsibilities, and the faculties of a nation." 24

Nivedita goes on to say:

"The people of a country have an inalienable right to do the whole work of their country.

Regarded from this point of view, then, each man becomes, not an entity by himself, not a fragment of a family or class or sect, but a free member of a great nation. In this way, he has to learn to think and feel and act.

In the realm of thought, this means, that each man must recognise his birth-land as the supreme fact in his life, and must consciously bow himself to her influence, glorifying in it, and striving to rediscover and realise it, in its essentials. In the realm of feeling, he must relate himself to the birth-land and to all those who, with him, are born of her. The land and the people -- India and the Indian nation." 25

From the above quotation it is evident that Nivedita wanted that every individual should regard himself not merely as an individual, not even as a unit of a family or of a class or of a sect, but he should look upon himself as a free member of a great nation. He should not identify himself with anything small or fragmentary, but should seek his grand self-fulfilment as an integral part of a mighty nation. The national sense and sentiment should predominate in his mental make-up. In his thought, in his feeling he should identify himself with his birth-land, and he should become one with his motherland. Such an attitude of mind on the part of every individual can alone become the bed-rock of a strong and triumphant nationalism.

Nivedita further writes:
Accepting the great purpose of nationality, and struggling to serve it with wholehearted devotion, the man and the community become transformed. Their purpose is renewed, is clearly conceived, is still more earnestly served. Experience grows to wisdom. Wisdom is deeper assimilated. Character is stored up. And by strength of character, man can remove mountains.”

In another very interesting article Nivedita strongly emphasised the need for nation building in India by the sheer power of intense and irresistible thought. She explained how thought can shape and mould human action and achievement. In this context Nivedita begins by quoting a saying of Buddha:

“All that we are ............... is the result of what we have thought. It is founded on our thoughts. It is made up of our thoughts.”

At the time when Nivedita was writing (early part of the twentieth century), people in India were yet in a hesitant and wavering mood. They were not sure of their ground, they were not certain of their political status. They dared not think of themselves as a distinct and well-formed nation. Even long after this period the distinguished national leader Surendranath Banerjee wrote an important book which bore the title, ‘A Nation in Making.’ Thus even at a much later stage Surendranath could only think of Indian people -- being in the process of formation as a nation; it was yet to attain fullness of growth. But Nivedita boldly asserted that India was already a nation if it only willed itself as such. A great magic might be worked by will-power.

Nivedita wrote:

“We have before us the task of Nation-building. But our means of accomplishment consists solely, in the first place, of thought. By clear and direct thinking, we may hew a path through all the forests of our difficulties. By weak and confused thought, we can only defeat our own aim.”

Nivedita continues:

“The duty of all who understand the Indian situation to-day, then, is to realise those eternal verities on which the cry for nationality is based. If we are strong and clear ourselves, in the essential idea, none will be able to
resist the love of the motherland in us. We shall ourselves stand as its embodiment and appeal. Even the general of the opposing army will surrender to the power of our thought." 

The following words of Nivedita spring from deep emotion, sincere conviction and clarity of thought:

"Now we have to understand that India will be a nation, just as soon as she conceives of herself as a nation. All that she needs is the realisation of this thought. 'India is one' is the formula of nationhood for her. A mantra means a great deal when it has realisation behind it, though without this, it is not even as good as a juggler's spell.

India is one. How much of India is one? Just so much, dear friend, as can summon up strength to realise the fact! India is one. But she is so disunited! Is she? Look again! Look facts in the face. Break through all hypnotism. Fear not. Go deep down into the truth of things. It may be that you shall some day say that never was there a country or a people so united, so woven together in all their parts, so fundamentally one, as this India of ours."

From the above it is clear how deeply Nivedita realised unity of India. The repeated theme of her discourse is 'India is one', 'India is one'. India is one not withstanding all the foreign observers' and the alien government's assertion to the contrary.

In this context, it is noteworthy that Nivedita laid great stress on Hindu-Muslim unity. Such unity was not merely a possibility or desirability, but it was a potent reality in Nivedita. Some historical facts have to be noted in this connection. Ever since the Indian National Congress was brought into existence, the Britishers began to play upon Hindu-Muslim differences and they took particular pains to point out that Muslims kept aloof from the Congress. Immediately after the first session of the Congress, the Bombay correspondent of the London Times wrote about the Congress as follows:

"Its congeries of races, its diversity of castes, all seemed to find common ground in their aspirations. Only one great race was conspicuous by its absence, the Mohammedans of India were not there. They remained steadfast in their habitual separation. They certainly do not yield to either
Hindu or Parsee in their capacity for development, but they persistently refuse to act in common with the rest of the Indian subjects of the Queen Empress. Not only in their religion, but in their schools, and almost all their colleges and all their daily life they maintain an almost haughty reserve. The reason is not hard to find. They cannot forget that less than two centuries ago they were the dominant race, while their present rivals in progress only counted as so many millions of tax-paying units who contributed each his mite to swell their glory of Islam.”

We find here not only an attempt to emphasise the aloofness of the Muslims from the Congress, but also to speak of the Muslims in highly patronising terms.

It is also noteworthy that Viceroy, Lord Dufferin in a letter to the Secretary of State, on 4th January, 1887, wrote about the Muslim non-participation in Congress as follows:

“You will have observed that the Mohammedans have abstained from taking any part in the Indian National Congress ............ What the Mohammedans feel is that under a Bengalee constitution they would be more completely left out in the cold than they are at present.”

The British policy in India has been all through one of divide and rule. After the mutiny in 1857-58, in which Muslims took a prominent part, the British policy was one of suppressing the Muslims and favouring the Hindus. Later, when the Hindus became active through Congress politics, the government became more and more indulgent towards the Muslims and sought to keep them away from Congress politics in a subtle and surreptitious way. Not that they completely succeeded. The number of Muslim delegates in the Congress gradually increased. In this connection the following is noteworthy:

“The first session of the Congress was attended by only 2 Muslims, the second by 33 and the sixth by 156 (22 per cent of the delegates). The bogey of Muslim opposition to the Congress was set up quite in the early years of the Congress and it is quite curious to note that Sheikh Raza Hussain Khan produced at the fourth session (1888, Allahabad) a Fatwa supporting the Congress from Shams-ul-Ulema, the leader of the Sunni Community in
Lucknow, and declared that it is not the Muslims but their official masters who are opposed to the Congress. The third and twelfth session of the Congress (1887 and 1896) were presided over by Muslim leaders.”

In the eighties of the nineteenth century Sir Syed Ahmed, a Muslim leader who received considerable patronage from the Government strenuously endeavoured to keep the Muslims away from the Congress. In this connection the following account presents a vivid picture:

“The year (1888) was also marked by another development led by Sir Syed Ahmed to keep the Muslims away from this national organisation (Congress). The Congress of 1888 was to be held at Allahabad .......... in the United Provinces, of which Allahabad was the capital. Sir Syed Ahmed was the acknowledged leader of the Moslem intelligentsia of U.P. Under his leadership a powerful movement soon organised itself in opposition to the Congress ............. As the Moslems were decidedly backward in modern education, compared to their Hindu brethren, the success of the Congress propaganda would mean Hindu ascendancy over the government and administration of the country. These were considerations that evidently led the astute Sir Syed Ahmed to advise his co-religionists to keep themselves away from the Congress, concentrating all their strength and energy in organising means for educating themselves with a view to challenge upon intellectual and moral grounds, the superiority of the Hindu middle class .......... Sir Syed Ahmed started a rival organisation of the Moslems under the name of Mohammedan Education Conference.”

During the Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon (1899-1905) very intensive efforts were made by the Government to divide the Muslims from the Hindus. In fact, Curzon sought to win over the Muslims for his partition by assuring the Muslims of their predominance in Eastern Bengal. He sought to secure the support of the Nawab of Dacca by offering him a substantial loan at a very low rate of interest. At his instance (i.e. of the Nawab) the All-India Muslim League was set up in December, 1906. Later it became a powerful rival of the Congress, being systematically supported and favoured by the Government.

The partiality of the government towards the Muslims became still
more evident during the Viceroyalty of Lord Minto (1905-1910). The following account is noteworthy:

“On May 28, 1906, Lord Minto wrote to Lord Morley, ‘As to Congress ............... there is much that is absolutely disloyal in the movement and that there is danger for the future. I have no doubt ............ I have been thinking a good deal lately of a possible counterpoise to Congress aims.’ On August 10, 1906, Mr. Archbold, Principal of Alligarh College, wrote to Nawab-Mahsin-ul-Mulk, Secretary, Alligarh College, ‘Colonel Dunlop Smith’, Private Secretary of his Excellency the Viceroy, informs me that His Excellency is agreeable to receive the Muslim Deputation. He advises that a formal letter requesting a permission to wait on His Excellency be sent to him. In this connection I would like to make a few suggestions. The formal letter should be sent with the signatures of some representative Mussalmans. The deputation should consist of the representatives of all the Provinces. The third point to be considered is the text of the address. I would have suggested that we begin with a solemn expression of loyalty. The Government decision to take a step in the direction of self-government should be appreciated. But our apprehension should be expressed that the principle of election, if introduced, would prove detrimental to the interest of the Muslim minority. It should respectfully be suggestion that nomination or representation by religion be introduced to meet Muslim opinion. But in all these views I must be in the background. They must come from your, ............ I can prepare for you the draft of the address or revise it. If it is prepared in Bombay, I can go through it, as you are aware. I know how to phrase these things in proper language. Please remember that if we want to organise a powerful movement in the short time at our disposal, we must expedite matters.” 35

Thus arranged, a Muslim deputation waited on Lord Minto on 1st October, 1906. It was led by the Aga Khan, the spiritual head of the Khoja Moslem community. Lady Minto wrote in her journal:

“This has been a very eventful day : as someone said to me, ‘an epoch in Indian history’ ............

This prince (Aga Khan) was selected to read the very long but excellent address stating all their grievances and aspirations. Minto then
read his answer, which he had thought out most carefully ...........

As your Viceroy, I am proud of the recognition you express of the benefits conferred by British rule on the adverse races of many creeds who to form the population of this huge continent. You yourselves, the descendants of a conquering and ruling race, have told me today of your gratitude for the personal freedom, the liberty of worship, the general peace, and the hopeful future which British administration has secured for India ............

Your address, as I understand it, is a claim that, in any system of representation ........... in which it is proposed to introduce or increase an electoral organisation, the Mohammedan community should be represented as a community ...........

I am entirely in accord with you. Please do not misunderstand me : I make no attempt to indicate by what means the representation of communities can be obtained, but I am as firmly convinced as I believe you to be, that any electoral representation in India would be doomed to mischievous failure which aimed at granting a personal enfranchisement, regardless of the beliefs and traditions of the communities composing the population of this continent. The great mass of the people of India have no knowledge of representative institutions ...........

In the meantime I can only say to you that Mohammedan community may rest assured that their political rights and interests as a community will be safeguarded by any administrative reorganisation with which I am concerned."

On the evening of the day on which the Muslim deputation met Lord Minto, an official wrote the Viceroy as follows :

"I must send your excellency a line to say that a very very big thing has happened today. A work of statesmanship that will affect India and Indian history for many a long year. It is nothing less than the pulling back of sixty two millions of people from joining the ranks of seditious opposition." From the above it will be clear how the British applied their divide-and-rule policy to keep the Muslims away from the Indian National Congress.

By the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 considerable favours were
conferred on the Muslims. They were not only favoured with separate electorate, but special voting rights were granted to them which were denied to other communities.

There was no question of jealousy against the Muslims. What was regrettable was the injustice that was done to non-Muslims. Another point was the political motivation behind the whole constitutional scheme. The clear object of the government was to please and placate the Muslims, so that they might not become involved in any way in Congress politics.

Sister Nivedita was well aware of the Government’s motive to drive in a wedge between Hindus and Muslims. She, therefore, always emphasised the need for unity between Hindus and Muslims. She always thought of Hindus and Muslims as co-partners in Indian nationhood.

At one place Nivedita writes:

"India has known two great periods of Nationality, the Buddhists and the Mohammedan." 38

Again she says:

"The whole theory of Hinduism is one of a vast accordance of faiths, and a scheme in which even Islam and Christianity, strongly individual as they are, may find places." 39

The following remarks are noteworthy:

".............. Akbar and his immediate successors, have all been men who understood the idea of Indian Nationality, and loved and worked for it." 40

Nivedita was fully convinced, and she emphasised again and again that Muslims were part and parcel of the Indian nation. The division between them was created by the British Government. She always urged upon the Indian people to be cautious against the divide-and-rule policy of the Government. Had her ideas in this regard been fully appreciated and followed by Indian leaders, the partition of India would never have taken place.

Nivedita also wrote an excellent essay entitled "A Theory of Freedom." She began with the question of a spiritual freedom of which much is said in the Hindu scriptures. This is no doubt of great significance and has a special importance. But political freedom is also an imperative necessity. In any
case there is no conflict between them.

Nivedita began thus:

"There is no such thing as absolute freedom for the individual, except in Mukti. Yet the individual has always striven for relative freedom in all directions. By this struggle for a freedom which he can understand, he makes himself ready for the supreme effort, by which he will one day gain the absolute liberty for Mukti itself. Each one of the minor forms of freedom is an image or symbol of that Transcendent Freedom." 41

She writes:

"The free man is that man whose will is efficient. The first enemy that the will has to encounter is ignorance, the second is unbridled impulse. To toil to see, to will and to attain, this is the four-fold debt that we incur to our forefathers by the very fact of birth. A man must strive, strive to the uttermost. And since without possible success there can be no intensity or effort he must often succeed." 42

She continues:

"Human beings are born, by incessant work to increase their own faculty, by ceaseless striving to add to their inheritance. They are born to disdain limitation. It is decreed in the counsels of God that man shall be confronted by destiny only to defy and master it, that the impossible shall to him become the possible, the one inexorable law of human life is effort to the utmost." 43

Then she turns her attention to the political aspects. She says:

"There is such a thing as the body-politic. Even the body-politic, however, has to conform to the spiritual claim of individual man, his right, by hopeful struggle to find Mukti.

The political unit furnishes new and more complex objects of attainment to the parts of which it is made up. New rights, new tasks, new ambition dawn upon us in relation to our political position." 44

Again she emphasises:

"But we must study the position of the individual in relation to this task of the body-politic. The land must be served by the nation and by the individual as a part of the nation; but not as divided from it and out of
relation to it. It is always thus, in an age of degradation when a people become passive and fall into static decay. We ought to be thankful for any blow that might rouse us up from so sluggish a condition. If we translate rights into duties and apply the new word as the key, many a problem will be unlocked." 45

Again she says:

"It follows that the task before us is to educate ourselves in the consciousness of our own unity. We have to saturate our own subconscious mind with the thought of it. We have so to make it a part of ourselves that we react instinctively on its behalf. Perfect harmony and mental cohesion of the body-politic is the necessary antecedent of political mastery which is another name for that relative good which we call national freedom." 46

She rightly proceeds to say:

"As the human brain converts the physical energy of food into the spiritual energy of thought, so must each Indian man become an organ for the conversion of the individual struggle for individual efficiency and mastery. Victory will remain in the end with that combatant in whom the highest mind and character are indissolubly united with the greatest love -- Yata Dharmastato Jayah.

A vague emotion is not enough however. We must serve and suffer for the objects of our love." 47

Nivedita next lays emphasis on the spirit of obedience. She writes:

"The first lesson we have to learn is that of implicit obedience to rightfully constituted authority. ............... Authority carries with it responsibility. We must learn to subordinate our self at a moment's notice to him of those responsibility we avail ourselves. Authority without responsibility cannot be considered here since it is unlawfully constituted and amounts to spiritual anarchism. Lawful authority is permeated and regulated by its own responsibility, we cannot concede the one without conceding the other. ............... 48

He who obeys best, rules best. He who rules best is most perfect in obedience ............."

".............. public order based on not force or fear, but on the mutual
What is the essential meaning of freedom? Nivedita writes:

“...it is freedom to make obedience or authority our own, ... And freedom for a nation, amongst the comity of nations is to stand unfettered in its quest for self-expression.”

IV

Sister Nivedita came to India in 1898 at the instance of Swami Vivekananda and in an intensely thoughtful and active life since lived in India (1898-1911), she made every word, that her Master had uttered about her, true. Indeed, few could surpass her total contribution towards the rise of India as a nation which meant to her India’s total awakening on the basis of national education, dynamic religion, and national liberation from foreign bondage. She perceived that these were the essentials. She articulated her ideas tirelessly for these essentials and worked ceaselessly for their realisation till the last day of her life in India.

Nivedita believed that without national awakening based on the above ideas there could never be any advancement towards national liberation. Education and religion were to prepare the ground by awakening the all-round awareness of identity and unity of the nation, which would lead to political freedom from the alien rule. She felt that having arisen a sense of oneness in the people through education, and religion, a united political struggle should be waged for freedom from the British. The analysis made in our study shows how she relentlessly worked on these essentials.

Nivedita’s philosophy on national awakening comprises her thoughts on education, religion, and politics, which she thought were essentially inter-related. She was an activist and a thinker. Thoughts and action went hand in hand with her. She realised that India was essentially a unity and spared...
no pains to enkindle that sense of unity in the minds of the people, which was fundamentally inherent in them. She not only preached her ideas through her powerful pen but made its practical application in her school at Baghbazar, which she extended to other parts of the country gradually.

Sister Nivedita actualised in her life the ideals of selfless action (nishkama karma) and selfless love for India following the ideals of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda. Way back in 1899, her action in nursing the plague victims in the dark and dirty dwellings of Baghbazar and attacking the root cause of that dreaded disease is an eye-opener to us even today. It is an exemplary approach towards putting into practice Swami Vivekananda’s ideas of selfless service to the poor and living the life, which she called the ‘religion of nationality’. She perceived that India at that time needed a strong sense of nationality and went at length in asserting that ‘nationality was the religion of India in the present period.’ True to Ramakrishna-Vivekananda ideals, she asserted that religion was not a matter of dogma or a theory but it was something dynamic and could be put to use for nation-building.

Nivedita took her time to firm up her political ideas only after she realised the true nature of the British rule and how bad it was for India. But the moment she realised that, nothing could prevent her from advocating that the British rule should go and that India must wrest back her freedom. Her political ideas were seasoned with the ideas of the Gita. Herself inspired, she kept on inspiring the people across the country for putting up a united struggle against the British rule. Nivedita’s personal involvement in politics made her take the decision of formally severing her relationship with the Ramakrishna Mission. She felt that national awakening would not be complete without political freedom.

In conclusion, it may be suggested that the ideas of Sister Nivedita which are idealistic and yet practical are crucially relevant to modern India threatened with fragmentation, rampant pluralism, and disintegrating forces. The idea of national unity may be lost, the idea we were fighting for for two hundred years. So, we have to explore the basis of unity in diversity. And it is perhaps easier for a foreigner in love with India to discover the basis of
unity which remains obscure to Indians divided by language, regional culture, ethnicity, and religion. We may do well to refer back to Nivedita’s nation-making and nation-building ideas on education, religion, and politics, which are distinguished by holistic thinking and positivity, the qualities India needs most at the moment.

Notes and References


2. Bhagini Nivedita O Banglaya Biplabbad, p. 199.


5. Ibid, pp. 516-17.


8. Ibid, p. 28.


12. The role of Nivedita as a counsellor to leaders of all shades of opinion became particularly evident during the Benares session of the Congress Party in December, 1905.


17. Bhagini Nivedita O Banglaya Biplabbad, p. 95. Also see p. 326 of ‘The Dedicated.’

21 The Modern Review, November, 1911, p. 517.
22 Pravrajika Atmaprana, op. cit, pp. 195-96.
26 Ibid, p. 287.
32 Ibid, p. 541.
40 Ibid, p. 293.
41 Ibid, p. 316.
46 Ibid, p. 320.
48 Ibid, p. 322.
49 Ibid, p. 324.
50 Ibid, p. 325.